DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 433 778 HE 032 328

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TITLE Student Satisfaction and Student Success in the University System of Georgia. AIR 1999 Annual Forum Paper.
PUB DATE 1999-06-00
NOTE 22p.; Paper presented at the Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research (39th, Seattle, WA, May 30-June 3, 1999).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Students; Higher Education; Participant Satisfaction; State Universities; *Student Attitudes; *Student School Relationship; Student Surveys; Undergraduate Study
IDENTIFIERS *AIR Forum; *Georgia; Student Satisfaction

ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings of a study which analyzed the relationship between student satisfaction and indicators of student success in the 34 institutions of the University System of Georgia (USG). A student satisfaction survey was administered to about 26,000 undergraduates and the results were merged with the system's student information system to track students over time. Preliminary data indicated that satisfied students were more likely to be successful than those who were less satisfied with college. Major findings indicated: (1) overall, 7 out of 10 USG students were positive about the services and environments at their institution; (2) 8 out of 10 USG two-year college respondents were satisfied with their institution; (3) students who were well-prepared for college academically tended to express high levels of satisfaction with college; (4) students who attended their first-choice institution tended to express high levels of satisfaction; (5) first-generation college students tended to express high levels of satisfaction with college; and (6) students with high levels of satisfaction in their freshman year were more likely to persist in college. Appendices provide background information on respondents and compare respondents to a national user group. (Contains 8 figures and 2 references.) (DB)

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Student Satisfaction and Student Success in the University System of Georgia

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Paper presented at the
39th Annual AIR Forum
Seattle, WA
June 1999

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This paper was presented at the Thirty-Ninth Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research held in Seattle, Washington, May 30-June 3, 1999.
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Dolores Vura
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Student Satisfaction and Student Success in the University System of Georgia

Abstract

To better understand the relationships between student satisfaction and student success in the University System of Georgia, the System administered a national student satisfaction survey to undergraduates in each of its thirty-four institutions and then merged the results with the System's student information system to track students over time.

This paper analyzes the relationships between student satisfaction and indicators of student success, including college GPA, progress toward a degree, and one-year retention rates. Preliminary data analyses indicate that satisfied students are more likely to be successful than those who are less satisfied with college. The presentation will explore differences among both student and institutional characteristics on student satisfaction and in mediating the relationship between satisfaction and success, modeling both two-year and four-year college perspectives.

The following points summarize the major findings:

- In general, USG university students were positive about the services and environments at their institution. They expressed a high level of satisfaction for *this college in general*, rating it 3.88 on a five-point scale. Seven out of ten university students said that they were satisfied or very satisfied with the college/university they attended.

- USG two-year college respondents expressed high levels of satisfaction for *this college in general,* rating it 4.00 on a five-point satisfaction scale. Eight out of ten two-year college students said that they were satisfied or very satisfied with the college they attended.

- Students who were well-prepared for college academically tended to express higher levels of satisfaction with college.

- Students who attended their first-choice institution tended to express higher levels of satisfaction.

- First generation college students tended to express higher levels of satisfaction with college.

- Students with higher levels of satisfaction in their freshman year were more likely to be retained.

Student Satisfaction and Student Success in the University System of Georgia

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Student Satisfaction and Student Success

Introduction

Factors affecting student retention have been well studied; however, there are few studies using individual level data across a large number and types of colleges and universities in a state system. It is often difficult or impossible for multi-college state systems of higher education to study retention using a full model such as the one suggested by Tinto.[1] Data on intentions and goals, extracurricular activities, and academic and social integration are often not available or have to be broadly proxied. This paper explores ways systems can merge available data bases to improve the study of retention. These aspects will be considered from a two-year and a four-year college perspective, using survey and enrollment data from a large university system.

Sample, Survey Administration, and Return Rates

In Fall 1997, the University System of Georgia (USG) for the first time administered the ACT Student Opinion Survey (SOS) to assess student satisfaction with college services and environment. The surveys were designed to assess enrolled students' perceptions of their institution's programs and services. Specific items addressed student satisfaction with college services, facilities, rules, regulations, policies, academic issues, admissions and registration procedures, and other aspects of the institution's environment. The System was able to compare students' levels of satisfaction to their cohorts across the nation and assess student satisfaction with their college or university experiences.[2] The survey data were then merged with data from the Student Information Reporting System (SIRS) from Fall 1997 through Fall 1998.

Each college and university in the University System of Georgia administered the survey to a sample of its student body. The number of students in the sample was selected to ensure that responses would be generalizable to the population of students at the institution level, given a

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[1]Tinto, Vincent. *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition* (2nd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

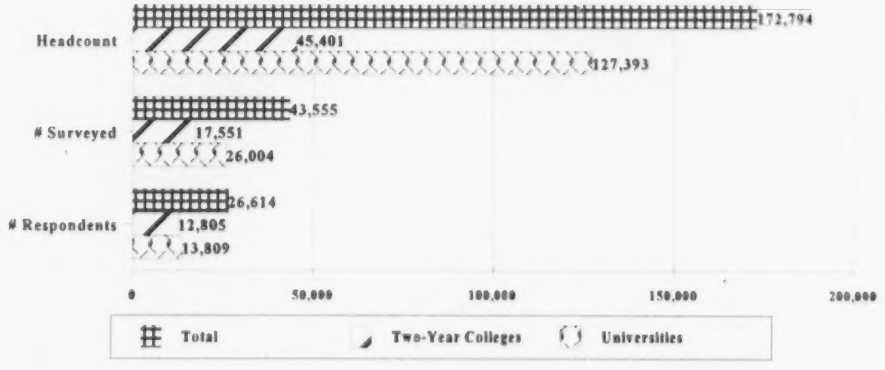
[2]The four-year national group norms contain 106,925 student surveys obtained from 193 four-year colleges and universities that administered the ACT SOS between January 1, 1995 and September 26, 1997. The two-year user group norms are based on 66,1184 student records obtained from 126 two-year public colleges that administered the ACT SOS between January 1, 1995 and September 26, 1997. To ensure appropriate comparative norms, all national norms reported here are based on the public subset of the national norms cohort. Although a wide range of colleges and universities is included in the national samples, the resulting data were not based on a random or pre-selected sample of institutions or students. ACT does not weight the sample responses to provide a nationally representative norm group.

response rate of at least 30 percent and an error rate of ± .04 percent. ACT instruments for public four-year and public two-year institutions were administered to 43,550 students, with a response rate of about 60 percent (26,600 responses).

The method of administering the survey varied among the universities and two-year colleges. Among four-year colleges and universities, two institutions administered surveys at meetings or allowed them to be taken home from class; three institutions distributed the surveys through U.S. mail, campus mail, or both; and the remaining institutions distributed and allowed completion of the surveys in class. A total of 26,004 instruments were distributed to 16 percent of university students enrolled in Fall 1997. Of that number, 13,809 students returned their surveys, representing a return rate of 53 percent. The institution-specific response rates among USG university students ranged from a low of 17 percent to a high of 100 percent (Figure 1).

All of the two-year institutions administered the survey during class. A total of 17,551 instruments were distributed to two-year college students representing 39 percent of two-year students in Fall 1997 (Figure 1). Of that number, 12,805 students returned their surveys for processing. The average return rate for two-year colleges was 73 percent. The lowest return rate among two-year colleges was 60 percent.

Figure 1
Population of Undergraduates, Number Sampled, and Number of Surveys Returned
Fall 1997



Demographic Data/Background of Students

Appendices 2 and 3 describe who the respondents were, using demographic and educational data. The following points describe the students:

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Four-Year Students

- The median age for the USG university students was 21, only slightly younger than the median age of 22 for the national comparison group. Thirty-five percent of the USG students were over age 23, compared to 44 percent of the national students.

- The respondents represented freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors, with more than half of USG students juniors or seniors.

- About 69 percent received financial aid, compared to 58 percent of students in the national group. About 43 percent of the USG respondents received HOPE, a Georgia program to provide full tuition for students who have a 3.0 high school GPA and maintain a 3.0 college GPA.

- One-third of the USG students and the national comparison group worked more than 21 hours per week.

- A larger percentage of the USG group were in-state residents (91 percent) compared to the national sample (86 percent).

- Three-fourths of both the USG students and the national sample planned to obtain a baccalaureate degree.

- A larger percentage of USG students (59 percent) than national students (54 percent) entered college directly from high school.

- The University System of Georgia universities had over twice the percentage of Black students (26 percent) as the national norms group (12 percent), consistent with the demography of Georgia and the University System of Georgia.

- Many students have their own family responsibilities in addition to college life; 16 percent of USG students were married, compared to 21 percent of the national norms group.

- Almost 20 percent of the respondents were the first in their family to attend college. There was not much difference in first-generation attendance between whites (19 percent), blacks (22 percent), and other minorities (24 percent) or between males (18 percent) and females (21 percent). There are no national comparative data for this survey question.

Two-Year Students

Appendix 3 contains summary data and percentages for selected aspects of two-year respondents' backgrounds.

- USG two-year institutions had larger percentages of Blacks, females, part-time students, and evening students than the national norms group.
- USG two-year institutions also had more students receiving financial aid, students who transferred from another two-year college, students who entered directly from high school, and students who worked 21 or more hours per week than the national norms groups.
- More than half of USG's two-year college respondents were employed 21 or more hours per week, 60 percent received financial aid, and nearly 45 percent entered college directly from high school.

Descriptive Analysis

The causal relationships among degree of preparation for college work, achieving in college, and satisfaction levels are not completely understood. It is not known if better students are more satisfied with college as a consequence of their academic success, or if higher levels of satisfaction improve academic success.

Overall Levels of Satisfaction

All students were asked how satisfied they were with *this college in general*. This question is often used as an indicator of overall satisfaction.[3] Seven out of ten university students (74 percent) were "very satisfied" or "satisfied" with the university they attended. Nationally, 74.3 percent of public four-year college students were very satisfied or satisfied with the college they attended. While there is some variance in responses across groups of students, similar levels of satisfaction are found among the subgroups (Figure 2).

[3] Student satisfaction is measured on a 1 to 5 scale, with 1 representing "very dissatisfied" and 5 representing "very satisfied." The neutral scale value is 3.0. Averages for each item are calculated for only those who responded to a question.

Figure 2 Satisfaction with "This College in General"			
College Environment	Average Rating		
	USG	Nation	Difference
University Students	3.88	3.85	0.03****
Two-Year College Students	4.00	4.07	0.07****
Significance levels: *=.05; **=.025; ***=.01; and ****=.005.			

Academic Preparation and Satisfaction

USG student data (SIRS) show that students who expressed satisfaction with the university they attend tended to have higher high school GPAs, SAT scores, and cumulative GPAs than students who were less satisfied.

Mean SAT Total

The mean SAT total score for university students who expressed satisfaction with the university they attend exceeded the mean score of those who were dissatisfied with their university and exceeded the mean SAT of all students who responded to this item. At the two-year college level, the relationship is not as straightforward. "Very satisfied" students had lower mean SAT scores than "satisfied" students, and "dissatisfied" students had slightly higher SATs than "satisfied" students. Students who expressed satisfaction with the college they attend scored slightly below the mean score for all students who responded to this item (Figure 3).

Mean HSGPA

The greater the level of satisfaction, the higher the mean HSGPA for both university and two-year college students who responded to this item (Figure 3), or stated another way, students who were less prepared for college were less satisfied with college.

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Figure 3
Mean SAT Verbal, SAT Math, and HSGPA by Satisfaction with "This College in General" for All USG Students & First-Time (FT) Freshmen

Sector and Class	Satisfaction with "This College in General"							
	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Neutral	Dis-satisfied	Very Dis-satisfied	Does Not Apply or NA	Mean	n
Mean SAT Verbal								
All Four-Year	516	504	476	491	462	427	501	8040
Four-Year FT Freshmen	514	511	480	505	463	376	507	2042
All Two-Year	451	458	444	453	417	423	454	6841
Two-Year FT Freshmen	446	457	445	430	420	439	452	2081
Mean SAT Math								
All Four-Year	518	504	480	484	463	442	501	8044
Four-Year FT Freshmen	515	511	485	488	465	354	507	2042
All Two-Year	433	444	435	450	419	419	440	6841
Two-Year FT Freshmen	431	445	437	429	396	420	439	2081
Mean SAT Total								
All Four-Year	1034	1008	956	975	925	868	1002	8040
Four-Year FT Freshmen	1029	1022	965	992	927	730	1014	2042
All Two-Year	884	902	879	904	836	842	893	6841
Two-Year FT Freshmen	877	902	882	858	816	859	891	2081
Mean HSGPA								
All Four-Year	3.09	3.03	2.86	2.84	2.75	2.62	3.00	6704
Four-Year FT Freshmen	3.14	3.05	2.95	2.90	2.78	2.23	3.06	1964
All Two-Year	2.65	2.65	2.53	2.56	2.41	2.48	2.63	7144
Two-Year FT Freshmen	2.69	2.69	2.58	2.38	2.29	2.59	2.67	2116

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The majority of the both the university and two-year respondents to the survey were attending the college of first choice (Figure 4). However, satisfaction levels decline as level of choice decreases. Students who were attending the college or university of their choice expressed higher levels of satisfaction with that institution (Figure 5).

Figure 4
Number of Students by College Choice

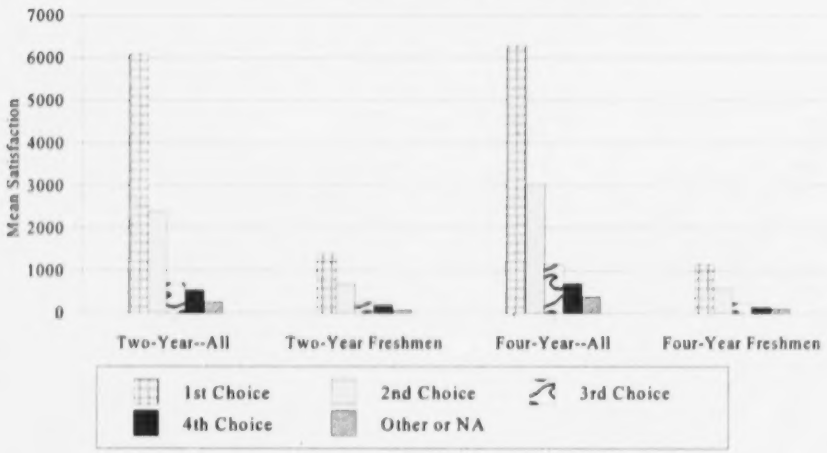
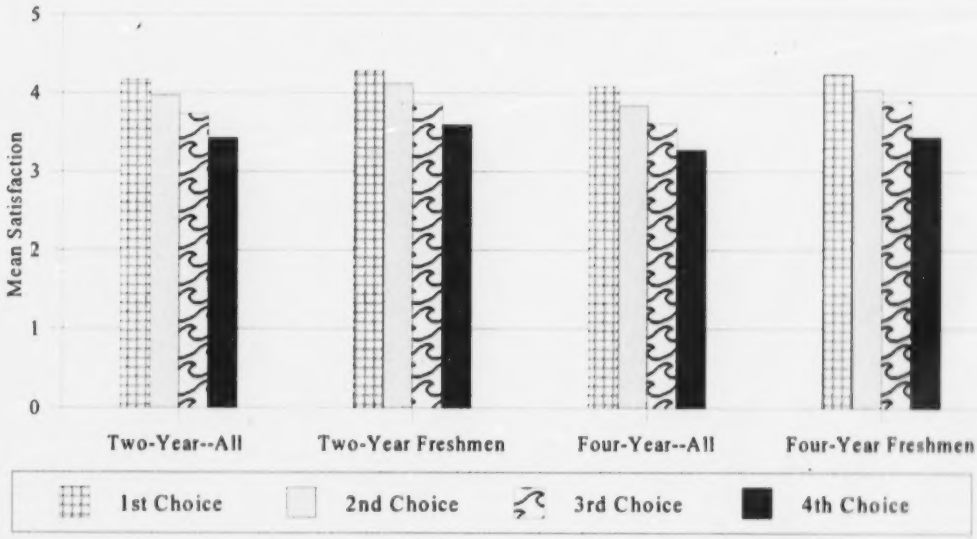


Figure 5
Satisfaction with "This College in General" by College Choice for USG Students (Very Satisfied = 5)



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Retention and Satisfaction

In Fall 1998 the survey results from Fall 1997 were merged with the Student Information Reporting System (SIRS). Fall to fall retention rates were calculated as either institution-specific or System-wide. It is important to note that the students who participated in the survey were not placed into any type of retention program. The retention results in this paper are based on students who participated in the survey and were still enrolled in the same institution, in USG, or not enrolled in USG in Fall 1998.

Four-Year

About 66 percent of the students who were in the Fall 1997 sample were retained in Fall 1998. About 17 percent of the Fall 1997 sample had graduated from the same institution, and less than one percent had transferred to another System institution and graduated. Because retention studies in USG are usually calculated for first-time/full-time freshmen only, it is difficult to make meaningful comparisons for the whole group of students. Thus, retention rates are also calculated for first-time freshmen. No restriction was made for full-time status, because the samples are too small, and there was no attempt to design the sample based on full-time status.

Figure 6 shows the number of students retained or graduated by Fall 1998 and their level of satisfaction with *this college in general* by college choice. Note that a linear relationship exists between retention and satisfaction. As the level of satisfaction increases, the retention rate also increases.

Most of the four-year, first-time freshmen returned to the same institution in Fall 1998. Due to graduations, the retention rate (same institution) for these students was significantly higher than the retention rate for all four-year students returning to the same institution. These students indicated high levels of satisfaction for *this college in general* (Figure 7).

Two-Year

Retention rates at two-year colleges were lower, regardless of level of satisfaction. Among two-year college students, 50 percent were retained in Fall 1998. Eight percent had graduated from the same institution, and less than one percent had transferred to another System institution and graduated.

Figure 6 shows the number of students retained or graduated by Fall 1998 and their level of satisfaction with *this college in general* by college choice. Note that a linear relationship exists between retention and satisfaction. As the level of satisfaction increases, the retention rate also increases.

Figure 6
Satisfaction with "This College in General" by College Choice for USG Sample Students in Fall 1997

Retained or Graduated by Fall 1998	Satisfaction with "This College in General"						
	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Neutral	Dis-satisfied	Very Dissatisfied	Does Not Apply or NA	TOTAL
Four-Year Colleges							
Retained Same	1657	4058	1158	281	85	13	7252
% Retained Same	70.6	66.2	61.8	54.2	55.6	65.0	65.7
Not Retained Same	690	2073	715	237	68	7	3790
Retained System	84	278	118	39	19	0	538
Graduated Same	369	1060	281	121	23	3	1,857
% Grad. Same	15.7	17.3	15.0	23.4	15.0	15.0	16.8
Graduated System	2	2	1	1	1	0	7
% Graduated USG	0	.1	0	.1	.2	.7	.1
N	2347	6131	1873	518	153	20	11042
Two-Year Colleges							
Retained Same	1344	2724	601	107	32	10	4818
% Retained Same	52.9	49.8	45.5	44.0	38.1	28.6	49.7
Not Retained Same	1199	2744	720	136	52	25	4876
Retained System	333	793	215	45	18	5	1409
Graduated Same	222	462	88	19	6	3	800
% Grad. Same	8.7	8.4	6.7	7.8	7.1	8.6	8.3
Graduated System	2	3	0	0	0	0	5
% Graduated USG	.1	.1	0	0	0	0	.1
N	2543	5468	1321	243	84	35	9694

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Freshman retention rates for four-year college students followed the linear relationship. Students who were satisfied with this college in general were retained at higher rates than students who expressed lower levels of satisfaction. However, two-year college freshmen did not follow this pattern. Students who were dissatisfied with the college they attend were retained at a rate of 62.2 percent, a rate slightly higher than that for "satisfied" students (61.7) (Figure 7).

Figure 7
Satisfaction with "This College in General"
for USG First-Time Freshmen in Fall 1997

Retained in Fall 1998	Satisfaction with "This College in General"						
	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Neutral	Dis-satisfied	Very Dissatisfied	Does Not Apply or NA	TOTAL
Four-Year Colleges							
Retained Same	547	900	193	34	15	4	1693
Percent Retained Same	83.0	77.2	68.9	60.7	65.2	80.0	77.3
Not Retained Same	112	266	87	22	8	1	496
Retained System	39	82	27	14	2	0	164
N	659	1166	280	56	23	5	2189
Two-Year Colleges							
Retained Same	503	883	146	23	4	3	1562
Percent Retained Same	65.8	61.7	50.9	62.2	36.4	30.0	61.5
Not Retained Same	261	547	141	14	7	7	977
Retained System	49	104	26	2	1	1	183
N	764	1430	287	37	11	10	2539

Note: No first-time freshmen had graduated after one year.

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Other Indicators of Success

Four -Year

The relationship between hours earned and satisfaction produced intriguing results. The levels of satisfaction for *this college in general* declined as students earned more hours. As four-year university students earned more hours, the less satisfied they were with *this college in general*. The opposite effect was true for first-time freshmen at four-year universities. As first-time freshmen students earned more hours, they expressed higher levels of satisfaction. Thus, maturation probably has some effect on satisfaction. As noted earlier, satisfied students had higher GPAs than less satisfied students (Figure 8).

Two-Year

No specific relationship between hours earned and satisfaction was noted for students matriculating at two-year colleges in USG. However, first-time freshmen with more hours expressed higher levels of satisfaction. Again, students with higher GPAs appeared to be more satisfied.

Figure 8
Mean Cumulative Hours Earned and College GPA by Satisfaction with "This College in General" for All USG Students & First-Time (FT) Freshmen

Sector and Class	Satisfaction with "This College in General"							
	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Neutral	Dis-satisfied	Very Dis-satisfied	Does Not Apply or NA	Mean	n
Mean Cumulative Hours Earned								
All Four-Year	67.1	77.0	85.1	87.5	101.6	92.8	84.6	11521
Four-Year FT Freshmen	31.7	30.2	26.9	26.9	26.1	19.8	30.1	2189
All Two-Year	36.9	37.3	34.4	39.9	37.1	23.3	36.8	10005
Two-Year FT Freshmen	19.8	18.0	14.6	13.7	9.6	13.6	18.0	2539
Mean College GPA								
All Four-Year	2.71	2.58	2.37	2.49	2.35	2.50	2.56	11521
Four-Year FT Freshmen	2.54	2.31	2.13	2.24	2.03	2.21	2.35	2189
All Two-Year	2.08	2.08	1.92	1.87	1.79	1.68	2.05	10005
Two-Year FT Freshmen	1.81	1.75	1.65	1.54	1.14	1.23	1.75	2539

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Student responses to levels of *satisfaction with this college in general* were cross-tabulated with responses to the question: *I am the first person in my family to attend college.* Whether or not students were first-generation college students did not impact on their level of satisfaction with the college they attended. Eighty-three percent of first-generation college students were satisfied or very satisfied with the college they attended, while eighty-one percent of those who were not first-generation students were satisfied or very satisfied. In both groups, 3 percent of respondents were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the college they attended.

Satisfaction and Success in College

The relationships among degree of preparation for college work, achieving in college, and satisfaction levels are not completely understood. It is not known if better students are more satisfied with college as a consequence of their academic success, or if higher levels of satisfaction improve academic success. However, there is a relationship between satisfaction with college and academic preparation and success in the University System of Georgia.

Maturation or the length of time in college may also play a role in satisfaction. Juniors and seniors were slightly less satisfied than freshmen and sophomores. Traditional freshmen (those who graduated from high school in 1997) exhibited higher levels of satisfaction than non-traditional students (those who graduated from high school prior to 1997). Again, the direction of causality is not known. It is possible that traditional freshmen are better satisfied with college because of the newness of the experience, or it is possible that our universities better serve traditional than non-traditional students.

Conclusions

The results of the SOS survey can be used by the System, but primarily by System institutions, to identify areas for strategic improvement. Some of the services with which students were less satisfied are not easy to change, such as adding more parking spaces or providing better housing, but it is possible to effect change in other areas of student services. For example, all USG institutions should use the SOS results as impetus to review financial aid services and registration processes and services. While the advent of HOPE has increased workloads in financial aid offices and the implementation of Banner (registration software system) has caused some registration transition problems, the survey results suggest these areas must be reviewed and improvements addressed. Determining how to improve the college environment may not be as straightforward. For example, many USG students do not feel that the university they attend expresses concern for them as individuals. The remedy to this problem may vary among institutions, but just alerting staff and faculty about this perception could go a long way to making people more sensitive about service to individual students.

Survey results can also be used to examine how well the university is perceived to serve different subgroups of students. Several survey items point to the conclusion that USG universities may not be serving non-traditional students as well as traditional students. The type of services needed by non-traditional students, such as day care services, may present new challenges to universities whose historic mission has been to serve traditional students.

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Appendix 1
Background Information, Section I, SOS
University System of Georgia Research, Regional, and State Universities
Compared to the National Four-Year Public College/University User Group
1997-98 Georgia SOS Project

Background Information — Four-Year Survey	Percentages		
	USG Universities	National Four-Year Comparison Group	USG vs. National Difference
1. Median age range	21	22	-1.0
2. % Age 23 and over	34.7	43.7	-9.0
3. % African-American or Black	25.8	11.8	14.0
4. % Native American (Indian, Alaskan, Hawaiian)	0.3	1.8	-1.5
5. % Caucasian or White	62.4	67.5	-5.1
6. % Mexican-American, Mexican Origin	0.3	5.2	-4.9
7. % Asian American, Oriental, Pacific Islander	3.2	4.2	-1.0
8. % Puerto Rican, Cuban, Other Latino or Hispanic	1.3	2.5	-1.2
9. % Plan to obtain a Bachelor's Degree	74.5	76.0	-1.5
10. % Plans Master's	6.4	9.6	-3.2
11. % Plans Doctorate or Professional Degree	3.9	2.6	1.3
12. % Female	58.8	58.0	0.8
13. % Married[a]	15.9	20.9	-5.0
14. % Working 21 or more hrs/wk	33.6	34.9	-1.3
15. % Receiving financial aid	69.4	57.5	11.9
16. % In-state residence classification	90.6	85.6	5.0
17. % Part-time student	12.7	16.6	-3.9
18. % Freshman/sophomore	43.6	33.5	10.1
19. % Junior/senior	51.4	55.2	-3.8
20. % Entered from high school	59.4	54.0	5.4
21. % Transferred from Voc Tech School	3.0	2.3	0.7
22. % Transferred from two-year college	14.6	18.0	-3.4
23. % Transferred from four-year college	18.9	19.7	-0.8

[a]"Married" does not include single, divorced, widowed, separated, or those who preferred not to respond.

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Appendix 2
Background Information, Section I, SOS
Georgia Two-Year Public Colleges Compared to the National Two-Year Public College User Group
1997-98 Georgia SOS Project

Background Information — Two-Year Form	Percentages		
	Georgia Two-Year Colleges	National Two-Year Comparison Group	Georgia vs. National Difference
1. Median age	21	22	-1.0
2. % age 23 and over	36.4	48.1	-11.7
3. % African-American or Black	22.1	9.2	12.9
4. % Native American (Indian, Alaskan, Hawaiian)	0.3	2.6	-2.3
5. % Caucasian or White	68.9	75.6	-6.7
6. % Mexican-American, Mexican Origin	0.4	2.7	-2.3
7. % Asian American, Oriental, Pacific Islander	1.4	2.0	-0.6
8. % Puerto Rican, Cuban, Other Latino or Hispanic	0.9	1.5	-0.6
9. % Ffemale	63.2	60.4	2.8
10. % Married[a]	20.6	26.8	-6.2
11. % With dependent children	25.4	34.4	-9.0
12. % Working 21 or more hrs/wk	53.0	46.5	6.5
13. % Rreceiving financial aid	59.5	54.8	4.7
14. % Part-time student	29.3	28.8	0.5
15. % Attended this college 2 years or less	80.0	78.9	1.1
16. % Entered from high school	44.7	35.7	9.0
17. % Worked before entry	22.7	31.5	-8.8
18. % Transferred from another Two-Year college	5.6	4.2	1.4
19. % Transferred from Four-Year college	10.1	6.8	3.3
20. % Entered after military	2.6	3.0	-0.4
21. % Lived within 5 miles	21.6	30.3	-8.7
22. % > 20 miles from campus	37.2	29.8	7.4
23. % Day classes most frequent	76.3	77.1	-0.8
24. % Evening classes most frequent	21.8	20.0	1.8
25. % Weekend classes most frequent	0.1	0.3	-0.2

[a]"Married" does not include single, divorced, widowed, separated, or those who preferred not to respond.

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